focus on women

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Literacy: A Key to Women's Empowerment

The young girl, a fifth grader, says good-bye to her classmates. Her mother died recently and she now has to stay home to cook and bring lunch to her father in the field where he works. At home, her grandmother, who is very old and blind, chides her son for withdrawing his daughter from school. "I will cook", she says. "But how can you? You are blind", he says. "What I can see being blind, you cannot see with your eyes open", the old woman replies.

The message of this dramatized public service announcement, broadcast frequently on national television in Bangladesh, is clear. Bangladesh, like many other countries, is opening its eyes to the reality that with almost two thirds of its female population illiterate, national development is severely hampered.

Over the past 30 years, an "education avalanche" has been sweeping across much of the world. Overall, student enrolment has increased, spending on basic education has grown, national and international actions have been taken to raise literacy rates. In most developed regions and in a growing number of developing countries, near universal literacy for young people has been achieved.

Women, too, have benefited from this "quiet revolution". Today, more girls and women are entering school. In some countries, such as Qatar, Dominica and Lesotho, there are even more women than men enrolled in higher education.

Despite this progress, years of neglect have left very high illiteracy rates among adult, especially rural, women in most developing countries. Huge gaps also exist in women's educational achievements. Women and girls in both developed and developing countries still do not have equal access to education and training resources.

Cold statistics, hard facts

Poor, overworked and illiterate—this is the profile of most adult, rural women in the majority of developing countries. Although they are largely responsible for the health and welfare of family members and in many societies grow a good part of the country's food, these women are often deprived of the very means to perform these functions more efficiently. They can neither read nor write.

According to the 1993 *World Education Report* of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 905 million men and women—almost a quarter of the world's adult population—are illiterate.

About 587 million, or 65 per cent of them, are women. In 1985, the number of illiterate women and men was 592 million and 352 million respectively.

There is also some good news. According to a recent study by the Population Action Council, a US-based study group, of roughly 885 million children going to school in 1993, about 400 million are girls. In some countries, especially in developed ones and some parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, there is already no significant gender gap in education at the primary level. The only regions where male/female disparities remain pronounced are South Asia, the Arab States and Sub-Saharan Africa.

- In much of South Asia and the Middle East, only one student in three is a woman. In Africa less than one primary or secondary student in three, and less than one tertiary student in five, is female.

Focus on women

• In some South Asian and African countries, the illiteracy rate for adult women is over 80 per cent. According to the UN's *World's Women: Trends and Statistics 1970-1990*, among women aged 30 years and above, illiteracy rates are 93.4 per cent in Nepal, 89.2 per cent in Pakistan, 98.2 per cent in Burkina Faso, 97.9 per cent in Mali and 90.4 per cent in Togo.

Though there has been broad progress towards universal literacy, a huge historical deficit remains among today's adult women which denies them full partnership in society.

• Illiteracy in rural areas continues to be high in most regions, even in countries where urban women have made significant progress. According to *World's Women*, this is sharpest in Latin America—where the rural illiteracy rate among women aged 15-24 is 25 per cent, compared with 5 per cent in urban areas. In Asia and the Pacific, rural rates are double urban rates (43 per cent compared with 22 per cent), and in Africa three quarters of rural women aged 15-24 are illiterate, compared with less than half in urban areas.

• The drop-out rate among girls is much higher than among boys. In Mali, a recent study found that 80 per cent of girls have never attended any school and 60 per cent of those who have attended dropped out during primary school. In Brazil, only 63 per cent of children who start primary school reach second grade, and only 47 per cent make it to fourth grade.

Favouring education for boys over girls is not exclusively a "third world matter". In developed countries, the ratio of boys and girls going to school is roughly the same at the primary and secondary levels when education is compulsory. But at the tertiary level, boys easily outnumber girls. Similarly, women's access to scientific and technical areas remains limited.

• According to the *Human Development Report* 1993, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ,the ratio of female to male third-level students in scientific and technical fields in Spain is 28 per cent, in Austria 25 per cent and in Canada 29 per cent.

• In the US, according to a recent study by the American Association of University Women, girls are systematically excluded from equal education through stereotyping and prejudice. Boys are preferred over girls in such subjects as math, science and technology.

Education: A critical area of concern

According to Mrs. Gertrude Mongella, Secretary-General of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, though there has been broad progress towards universal literacy, a huge historical deficit remains among today's adult women, especially rural women, which denies them full partnership in society.

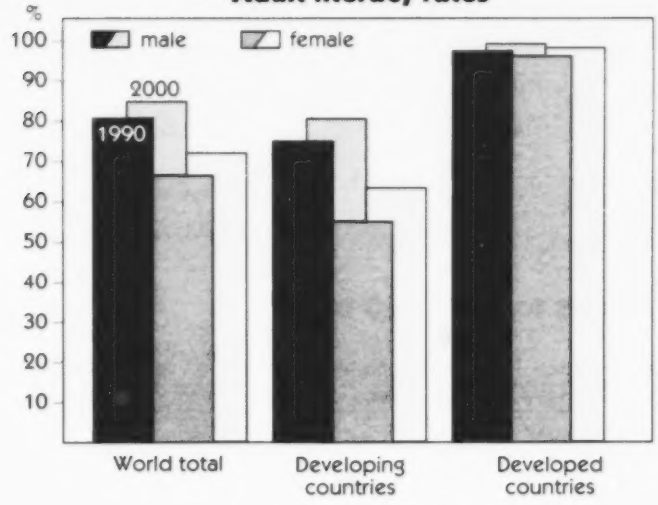
If women are to contribute effectively to national development into the twenty-first century, "the fundamental question is whether they will be sufficiently equipped to participate fully by receiving a quality education that will prepare them to enter any field, expose them to science, technology, and communications and stimulate their creativity", said Mrs. Mongella.

Education is one of the ten critical areas of concern identified by the United Nations for discussion at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995. It is also an indispensable objective for two other United Nations conferences—the International Conference on Population and Development (September 1994, Cairo, Egypt) and the World Summit for Social Development (March 1995, Copenhagen, Denmark).

Since 1975, when the first World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City, education for women has remained a key issue on the international agenda. *The Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000*, adopted at the third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, described education as the basis for the full promotion and improvement of the status of women, a basic tool that should be given to women in order to fulfil their role as full members of the society.

In 1990, when the world observed International Literacy Year, the question of equal access to education by women was widely discussed. The same year, the World Conference on Education for All was held in Jomtien, Thailand. The Conference designated education for girls as a top priority. Co-sponsored by UNESCO, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank, the Conference initiated a number of programmes aimed at reducing the disparity in illiteracy rate between the sexes and eliminating the social and cultural barriers that have discouraged women and girls from seeking equal opportunities in all aspects of their lives. Since the Conference, the World Bank has almost doubled its lending to basic education, from about $500 million in 1990 to $1 billion in 1993. Similarly, UNDP doubled its expenditure and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) agreed to allocate one fourth of its total budget for basic education.

Adult literacy rates



Source: World Education Report 1993, UNESCO

Why educate women?

There is a growing consensus now that education, irrespective of who receives it, contributes to development. It raises income, promotes health and increases productivity. There is also a consensus that when women are the recipients, the benefits are even more apparent.

Here are some reasons why:

- **Better health:** An educated mother can raise a healthier family. She not only knows about nutrition but also knows how to act during health-related emergencies. A mother's education may be more important to her children's health than flush toilets or piped water, or even food intake, says a UN Population Fund (UNFPA) report. It puts the difference in child mortality (deaths of children between one and five) as high as 9 per cent for every year the mother was at school. In Ghana, for instance, 52 per cent of uneducated women believed that illness was caused by spirits, but only 31 per cent of women who had been to primary school held this belief. In Peru, educated women were found to have healthier children regardless of whether there was a clinic or hospital nearby. Another study shows that a one per cent rise in women's literacy has three times the effect of a one per cent rise in the number of doctors.

- **Smaller families:** Educated women tend to have fewer children, slowing population growth. According to a 1993 report of the Population Action Council, average family size and child death rates are lowest in countries such as Sri Lanka and South Korea, which combine strong family planning and health programmes with high levels of education for women. Conversely, they are highest in countries such as Ethiopia and Malawi, where the level of female education is low and family-planning and health programmes are weak. In Brazil, uneducated mothers have an average of 6.5 children each, but those with secondary education have only 2.5.

- **Greater productivity:** Educated women are more productive both at home and in the workplace. A World Bank study of 200 countries showed that nations that had invested heavily in female primary education benefited through higher economic productivity. In Bangladesh, for example, women, who account for almost 90 per cent of the labour force in the garments sector, were found to be able to increase productivity and improve quality when given training. The World Bank concludes that failure to raise women's education to a par with men's exacts a high devel-

Focus on Women

When a woman is educated

The link between literacy and women's social status is undeniable. According to the preparatory documents for the World Summit for Social Development, which will be held in Copenhagen in March 1995, education decisively determines a woman's access to paid employment, her earning capacity, her overall well-being and contributions to her family and to the society.

The Draft Declaration and Programme of Action of the Social Summit make a strong case for educating women as part of the solution to the Summit core issues: poverty, unemployment and social disintegration.

A basic premise of the draft Programme of Action is that unequal access to resources, technology and knowledge has created unequal growth and led to increasing socio-economic inequality, both within and among nations. "Universal and equitable access to basic education for all children, young people and adults, in particular for girls and women, is a fundamental priority", the Draft Programme of Action states. Ensuring equal opportunity is vital to a sense of human security. And human security, in turn, is crucial to safeguarding stability and peace in our world, it points out.

The inspiration for the Copenhagen Summit grows out of the General Assembly's determination, in the coming 50th anniversary year of the United Nations, to reaffirm the United Nations Charter goal of promoting "social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom".

By eradicating illiteracy and educating women, the world may get closer to that goal.

School enrolment — ratio of girls to each 100 boys

Region	First-level education			Second-level			Third-level		
	1970	1980	1990	1970	1980	1990	1970	1980	1990
Africa	65	74	79	46	57	69	20	30	32
Latin America & the Caribbean	94	95	95	98	107	109	72	74	106
Western Europe and Other	95	95	95	90	98	98	53	72	94
Asia and Pacific	66	78	84	58	70	77	46	63	84
Eastern Europe	94	94	96	97	91	94	78	106	104
World	77	84	87	67	80	85	46	61	75

Source: Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Secretariat,
Based on information contained in *Womens's Indicators and Statistics Data Base* (WISTAT), version 3, 1994.

opment cost—in lost opportunities to raise productivity and income and improve the quality of life. And at the family level, as women gain access to better employment due to better education, families benefit through higher earnings.

An equitable society cannot be achieved if fundamental rights continue to be denied to women.

- **Improved status:** Educated women tend to make more independent decisions and stand up for themselves. According to a UNFPA report, in Kerala, India, educated women, however poor, seem to believe they have a right to good health care. But in Uttar Pradesh, also in India, illiterate mothers would not take their sick children to doctors without first obtaining permission from their husbands or in-laws.

- **Social effect:** Women, when educated, tend to encourage their children to become educated.

Educating women: Overcoming obstacles

If everyone agrees that educating women is such a good idea, why haven't we made more progress?

One reason is economic. Education costs money even when free schooling is available. First, there are school supplies to be bought and clothes to be made. More importantly, when daughters go to school, there are opportunity costs of lost work they could have done at home or in the market-place. World Bank studies show that in Nepal and Java (Indonesia), most young girls spend at least a third more hours per day working at home and in the market-place than boys of the same age.

Equally important are social and cultural factors. In many traditional societies, family and community attitudes are still hostile to female literacy. "Women who talk back to men stay unmarried", commented an African male at a recent UNICEF/non-governmental organization (NGO) conference. Often, husbands don't want their wives to attend literacy classes if they themselves are illiterate. "They get cross when supper is late", said a South African woman. Parents may want to send their daughters only to schools with female teachers, but in most low-income countries, only one third of primary, less than one fourth of secondary, and just over one tenth of tertiary education teachers are women. In some developing countries, parents may also feel it is unsafe to send their daughters to attend distant schools.

Problems for adult women are far more complex. Their work often begins before dawn and ends long after sunset. Describing the obstacles, UNESCO, in a recent report, painted this scenario:

Women in many developing countries are engaged for twelve to eighteen hours a day, every day of the week, in order to ensure the survival and well-being of their families. They must prepare meals and care for children, walk miles to find and carry back firewood and still more miles to get water. In certain parts of the world, women play the main role in growing food as well as in selling or trading it for other needed items.

Under these circumstances, how will it be possible for women to attend literacy or other classes, even if their husband allow them to do so? And while they are in class, who will attend to their children?

The right to read

Education is a fundamental right. An equitable society, a goal set by the countries of the world in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948, cannot be achieved if fundamental rights continue to be denied to half the world's population. "Gender apartheid is an obscenity", said UNICEF's Executive Director, James P. Grant. "It won't end without educating girls."

A change in male attitudes towards women may help to improve the status of women. UNESCO feels that in terms of education there is at least one sign of optimism: more men are becoming literate. Since literate parents tend to send their daughters to school, the higher the literacy rate among men, the higher the literacy rate will be among women. Specific measures taken by Governments and NGOs have also helped close the gender gap.

- In India, the Government offers such incentives as midday

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Two women

In Konkoran, a remote village in Mali near the edge of the Sahara desert, life has stood still for centuries. The only thing that moved was the water in the Niger River, which lately has been carrying diseases, parasites and the risk of river blindness. Thirty per cent of the children in Konkoran may die before the age of five, often due to water-borne diseases. Clean, safe water can save many lives. Several United Nations agencies have launched a literacy programme as part of a campaign about safe drinking water.

Like most other Konkoran women, Fanta raised animals to feed the family and provide income. She was one of the first to join the literacy programme. In addition to basic skills, like reading and arithmetic, Fanta learned about oral rehydration, or "life water", as it is called here. She now treats children with diarrhoea. Each week Fanta administers the dispensation of chloroquin to protect children from malaria. Fanta has also learned better methods for raising goats and healthier ways to prepare the milk — both for her family and for sale in the market. Village women who cannot read often come to her to write letters for them, or to seek advice on practical matters. "I never say 'no'," Fanta says with an amiable smile. Literacy has given Fanta's life a whole new meaning and a new level of status in her village.

A world away, in far-off Bangkok, Thailand, lives Youphadee. Her family is among the 400 who live in the sprawling Rajataphan slum, where she makes her living by selling food in the street. After Youphadee joined a literacy programme sponsored by the Government and UNESCO, she learned basic accounting. "I now can calculate what I need to run my business", Youphadee says proudly.

Besides learning to read and write, Youphadee also learned about hygiene and better ways to keep her home clean and dry. But like other women in the programme, she needed more than classes. Through their initiative, a day-care centre was added to the programme. She no longer has to worry about her children's safety while she and her husband are working.

Together with other women, Youphadee has also formed a credit union, which provides much-needed loans for family emergencies and investment in businesses. Youphadee is convinced education for girls is very important. "Educate girls because they have a more difficult life. If I had to choose between sending a boy or a girl to school I would send the girl", she says.

For both Fanta and Youphadee, literacy has been their passport to freedom. It has given them new confidence in their capabilities and enabled them to shape and control their own lives.

Stories drawn from *Women and Literacy*, a half-hour video produced by DPI in association with 10 UN agencies and departments. For copies, write to: Promotion and Distribution Unit, S-805A, Department of Public Information, UN Headquarters, New York, 10017, USA

meals and free education for girls up to grade seven. The Government has also launched a publicity campaign to eliminate gender bias in textbooks.

The Fourth World Conference on Women will consider practical measures Governments can take to advance the status of women.

- In Zimbabwe, the Government has adopted a "policy of positive discrimination" in favour of girls. For years it practised a system of selecting an equal number of boys and girls for the country's sixth form. In the first years of the programme standards were lower for girls and it was difficult to fill the female quota. As a 1992 UNICEF-sponsored conference was told, they are now equal in both numbers and ability. Results show the sixth form as the only one where the male and female enrolment approaches equal numbers.

- In Ghorka, Nepal, Save the Children, an international NGO, encourages women to work in small learning groups. They meet in simple shelters, identify their own teachers, develop their own sense of group solidarity and organize men to do the construction. Over a two-month period, six nights a week, they receive basic literacy lessons. This is followed by a post-literacy system of women's production groups which include cash earning projects, such as fruit growing, local crafts and tree nurseries.

- In Burkina Faso, the Government reached more than 13,000 rural women by introducing boarding centres. Using ten national languages, the Government provided boarding centres during four residential sessions of 12 days each, spaced out with weekly breaks so that the participants could return home to their families. This gave women a break from competing demands and duties at home.

The chalienges ahead

The Fourth World Conference on Women will consider practical measures Governments can take to advance the status of women. In a draft Platform for Action, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women identified four broad targets for advancing women's education:

- **Ensuring women's access to quality education and training:** A substantial quantitative and qualitative improvement of the education of girls and women needs to be made to achieve equality. Gender disparities should be forcefully addressed and gender-sensitive education and training should be developed.

- **Achieving education for all:** Top priority should be given to removing gender disparities from national policies and programmes for universal primary, secondary and higher education and adult literacy. More resources should be allocated to achieve equality in enrolment and prevent drop-out of girls from formal schooling.

- **Preparing women for the twenty-first century:** Measures should be taken to encourage women and girls to enter new fields of study, including science and technology. Lifelong training for women should be promoted, as well as women's participation in decision-making levels in education.

- **Make education gender-sensitive:** Action should focus on the elimination of social stereotypes from curricula, textbooks and training materials. Legal literacy components and information on human rights should be incorporated in the curricula. NGOs should play a more active role.

The dream still lives

Describing her dream of an ideal society, Christine de Pisan, a French courtier, wrote in the fifteenth century that since both women and men were equally intelligent, they should receive the same education.

Today, more than 500 years later, de Pisan's ideal has not been realized, but the dream remains alive. As the world prepares to enter a new millennium, the challenge it faces is to translate that dream into reality. In Beijing, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the world will get another opportunity to renew its pledge to equality and chart out a new course of action to further empower half its population. One key to their empowerment will be education.

Focus on Women

Literacy for women: Guidelines for action

1. Ensure access by girls and women to education and improve the quality and relevance of that education for them.
2. Eliminate gender stereotyping in school curricula.
3. Set specific targets and time-frames to progressively reduce the gender gap.
4. Establish schools and learning centres within walking distance of girls' homes.
5. Recruit more women teachers.
6. Campaign to elicit parental support and participation in education.
7. Make more efforts to enrol young married girls and adolescent mothers in basic education programmes. Provide day-care facilities.
8. Enforce a minimum legal age for marriage.
9. Adopt innovative programmes to combine learning with income earning for out-of-school girls and women in poor communities.

Estimated illiterate population aged 15 and over, in millions

Region	1980			1990			2000		
	m/f	f	%f	m/f	f	%f	m/f	f	%f
World	945.8	586.4	62.0	905.4	586.4	64.8	869.4	553.8	63.7
Developing countries	898.5	557.4	62.0	873.9	567.0	64.9	853.7	543.3	63.6
Sub-Saharan Africa	132.3	77.9	58.9	138.8	86.6	62.4	146.8	93.4	63.6
Arab states	58.1	35.3	60.8	61.1	38.4	62.8	65.8	42.1	64.0
Latin America & Caribbean	45.1	25.6	56.8	43.3	24.0	55.4	41.7	23.3	55.9
Eastern Asia & Oceania	306.7	205.7	67.1	232.7	162.4	69.8	165.6	111.5	67.2
of which: China	241.9	166.7	68.9	181.6	127.3	70.1	123.2	83.8	68.0
Southern Asia	350.6	208.6	59.5	398.1	242.2	60.8	437.1	271.3	62.1
of which: India	253.1	153.5	60.6	280.7	173.6	61.8	298.5	187.9	62.9
Least Developed Countries	124.6	71.8	57.6	148.2	89.0	60.1	170.1	104.8	61.6
Developed countries	47.3	29.0	61.3	31.5	19.4	61.6	15.7	10.5	66.9
Northern America	9.5	5.1	53.7	6.2	3.3	53.2	1.0	0.5	50.0
Asia & Oceania	2.9	1.9	65.5	1.0	0.7	70.0	0.3	0.2	66.7
Europe & former USSR	29.4	18.8	63.9	19.7	12.6	64.0	9.7	6.7	69.1

Source World Education Report 1993, UNESCO

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